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Testimony of Leonie Haimson before the NYC Council Education Committee on the Renewal School Program

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Thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Leonie Haimson, and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters, a citywide advocacy group devoted to providing information on the benefits of small class size to parents in New York City and across the country.

The Department of Education refers to the Renewal Program as a "call to action."¹ Action is indeed desperately needed to improve New York City's struggling schools, but the Renewal Program by and large has been a disappointment. An analysis by Aaron Pallas of Columbia University shows that Renewal Schools have not performed better than comparable non-Renewal Schools.²

Why is the Renewal program not living up to expectations? Why are many of these schools not exhibiting the improvements we need?

Reducing class size is the education intervention most strongly supported by rigorous evidence and has been shown to be particularly effective for students with disadvantaged backgrounds.³ Since 2007, DOE has made special promises to the state to reduce class size in its lowest-performing schools, as part of its Contract for Excellence obligations. For the first seven years or so, this involved a list of 75 low-performing schools with especially large class sizes. Yet many of these schools **never** lowered class size to acceptable levels, and many are now closed.

Others have continued to struggle. Promises have been repeatedly made to these children, to parents, and to the state that were repeatedly broken. Starting in 2014, DOE has promised to focus its class size reduction efforts more specifically at the Renewal schools.

¹ Quoted from <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/RenewalSchools/default>

² Pallas' research is discussed here: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2017/09/18/in-year-three-of-new-york-citys-massive-school-turnaround-program-the-big-question-is-whats-next/>

³ Institute of Education Science, [Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User Friendly Guide](#), 2003. See also research studies at <https://www.classsizematters.org/research-and-links/> and fact sheets at <https://www.classsizematters.org/fact-sheets-on-the-benefits-of-class-size/>

“To better align with the Chancellor’s priorities, C4E’s class size reduction plan will now focus on the 94 schools in the School Renewal Program.”⁴

This hasn't happened either.

According to our analysis, in nearly half (or 42 percent) of Renewal Schools, there was no reduction in average class size from November 2014 to November 2017.⁵ Of the schools that did not reduce class size, the average increase in class size was more than two students per class, with some schools increasing class sizes by significantly more than that.⁶

Even among those schools which did lower class sizes, 18 percent did so by less than one student per class on average. Not one of the Renewal schools this fall capped class size at the levels in the city’s original C4E plan, that is, 20 students per class in grades K-3, 23 students in 4th-8th grades and 25 students per class in high school. Worse yet, in 73 percent of the Renewal schools, there were maximum class sizes of 30 or more.

The turnover in teaching staff has not helped either. In October of 2017, the DOE announced that at two of the Renewal Schools, Flushing High School and DeWitt Clinton High School, all teachers would have to reapply for their jobs.⁷ That both schools are still struggling is not surprising, given that the previous year, these schools had the highest and third highest class sizes of any in the Renewal program, with classes as large as 43 students per class in science, and 39 in English respectively, according to DOE data.⁸ Hiring inexperienced teachers and large classes are a surefire way to undermine a school’s progress and this policy reveals a profound lack of vision on behalf of this administration.

DOE had promised the state since at least 2013 to reduce class size in at least one of the Renewal schools currently planned for closure, PS 50 Vito Marcantonio in District 4, according to the city’s

⁴ NYC DOE Assessment 2014-2015 Contracts for Excellence Public Comment, December 30, 2014, p. 4 at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/AF304521-9C1E-4EA6-B694-5F9CC80487E9/175614/C4EPublicCommentAssessment20142015FINAL.pdf> This statement is repeated in every DOE proposed C4E plan since then, as posted and archived here: <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/funding/c4e/default.htm>

⁵ The November 2014 and November 2017 Preliminary Class Size Reports are used for the data discussed in this testimony, reflecting class sizes as of Oct. 31 of each year. We do not use the Feb. reports, reflecting class sizes as of Jan. 31, since many students have been discharged or dropped out of school by that date, especially in high school. The Nov. 2014 report is posted here: http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/data/classsize/classsize_2014_11_14.htm We archived the Nov. 2017 class size data, reflecting class sizes as of Oct. 31, 2017 though the DOE has now deleted that data from its website and improperly substituted Feb. 2018 data.

⁶ For example, at the Leaders of Tomorrow, a Bronx middle school in District 11, which resulted from a merger of two struggling schools in Sept. 2016, the average class size increased from 21.1 in that year to 27.9 this fall.

The November 2016 Preliminary Class Size Report is archived at http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/data/classsize/classsize_2016_11_15.htm

⁷ <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2017/10/19/the-entire-staffs-at-two-troubled-new-york-city-high-schools-must-reapply-for-their-jobs/>

⁸ These data from the November 2016 Preliminary Class Size Report.

Contract for Excellence plan.⁹ Yet the DOE never followed through. Instead, this fall, class sizes at PS 50 are 28 in 1st grade and 30 in 2nd grade, which are far too large, especially for a struggling school that has 32 percent of its students with disabilities, and an 89 percent economic need index.¹⁰

In contrast, another Renewal school, PS 15 Roberto Clemente in District 1, has seen great strides and has moved off the Renewal list. This school, which the *New York Times* called the Renewal program's "best performer," reduced class sizes from an average of 18.3 students per class in November 2014 to 15.7 in November 2017, with most classes far below 20 students this fall.¹¹ According to the DOE's performance dashboard, PS 15 also demonstrated the second highest positive impact of any public elementary school in New York City in terms of achievement, when adjusted for the need level of its students.¹²

Our analysis of Renewal school data reveals a significant correlation between each school's positive impact as measured by the DOE's Performance Dashboard and its average class size, at -.33, meaning the smaller the class size, the larger the school's positive effect on achievement, adjusted for the need level of its student body.¹³

The Renewal Program has come at substantial cost. In 2016-2017, per-student expenditures at these schools were twice that of New York City's most elite public schools, such as Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant.¹⁴ Yet much of the money spent on the program has been wasted. According to an investigation by the *New York Post*, millions have been spent on "instructional coaches" and "leadership coaches" making up to \$1400 dollars a day.¹⁵ Many of these consultants already earn hefty six-figure pensions, and some of them, including former principals, have a history of scandal or poor performance.¹⁶

The *New York Times* estimates that the four-year cost of the program at the end of this academic year will be \$582 million.¹⁷ Yet for the same amount, or \$144 million dollars a year, the city could have hired roughly 1,450 teachers (at \$100,000 dollars each), an average of more than 15 additional teachers per school to reduce class size. Simply hiring more teachers would have provided students at these schools a

⁹ <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/funding/c4e/ClassSizeReduction2013-14>

¹⁰ This data from the DOE's performance dashboard for PS 50 here:
https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/#dbn=04M050&report_type=EMS&view=City

¹¹ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/nyregion/new-york-city-schools-test-scores.html>

¹² https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/#dbn=01M015&report_type=EMS&view=City

¹³ See appendix for details. The average class size in November 2016 of schools leaving the Renewal Program to become Rise Schools was 21.5, compared to 22.8 for Renewal Schools that will remain in the program, close, or be consolidated.

¹⁴ <https://nypost.com/2017/03/05/citys-renewal-program-costs-big-bucks-but-shows-few-results/>

¹⁵ <https://nypost.com/2017/03/05/citys-renewal-program-costs-big-bucks-but-shows-few-results/>

¹⁶ <https://nypost.com/2017/03/07/de-blasios-questionable-school-consultants-cost-taxpayers-millions/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/nyregion/renewal-schools-program-progress.html>

far better chance to succeed. Instead, by closing these schools, many capable teachers will be put on the Absent Teacher Reserve, used as substitutes or roving teachers, and never assigned to a permanent class and thus available to reduce class size.

One more point: among the schools that the DOE has now proposed closing is one that is not on the Renewal list: PS 25 Eubie Blake in Brooklyn. According to the DOE's own analysis on its School Performance Dashboard, PS 25 is the second best elementary school in Brooklyn and the fourth best public elementary school in the entire city, when the need level of its students is taken into account.¹⁸

The school recently was named a Reward School by the state.¹⁹ PS 25 also outperforms every charter school in terms of its positive impact on learning -- except for Success Academy Bronx 2. If it closes, the entire building will be left to Success Bed Stuy 3, which is now co-located with PS 25.

Last year, PS 25 enrolled a large percentage (31 percent) of students w/ IEPs, 10 percent with serious disabilities in self-contained classes, and its students had a high economic need index (85 percent). And yet this school has improved sharply on the state exams in recent years -- to levels substantially above the city average.

Last year, the school outperformed other elementary schools with similar populations in their proficiency on the state exams by an astonishing 21 percent in ELA and Math. Its students with IEPs in inclusion or general ed classes outperformed similar students by 47 percent in ELA and 20 percent in math. PS 25 students in self-contained classes outperformed similar students by an astonishing 53 percent and 51 percent respectively.

So why does the Chancellor want to close PS 25, given this stellar record of achievement? The DOE's Educational Impact Statement says the school is being closed "*based on low enrollment and lack of demand from students and family.*"²⁰ According to the EIS, PS 125 is serving only 94 students this year.

Yet many of the public schools in District 16 have lost enrollment, in part because of the super-saturation of charter schools in the district. Moreover, families in these neighborhoods are unaware that according to the DOE's analysis, the school is the second best in Brooklyn in terms of its positive impact on student achievement, and the fourth best in the entire city; if they knew this, they would likely flock to enroll their children in the school. The Chancellor could also put another preK in the school or place a 3K in the building if she wanted its enrollment to grow.

¹⁸ https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/#dbn=16K025&report_type=EMS&view=City The only three public elementary schools which have a greater positive impact on student achievement, out of 661 elementary schools citywide, according to the DOE, are the Walton Ave. school in the Bronx, PS 15 in Manhattan and PS 172 in District 15. One can see the impacts of all NYC schools on this spreadsheet: https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/data/dashboard/impact_performance.xlsx

¹⁹ <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2018/commissioner-identifies-155-high-achieving-and-high-progress-schools-reward-schools>

²⁰ http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/AE8473F1-3A8B-4C65-9F8F-3C63C9DA32C9/220056/EISPS25closure_vFinal.pdf

The fact that the school is under-enrolled is also likely one of the reasons it has succeeded so brilliantly, with exceptionally small class sizes that range from 10 to 18 students per class -- the sort of class sizes and close instructional support that all high-need kids in poverty should receive. Yet the DOE has repeatedly refused to align its school capacity formula with smaller classes, despite the strong recommendations of the Blue Book Working Group, composed of teachers, DOE officials and parent leaders.²¹

Closing a public school which has provided its students with such a rare opportunity to succeed would be a travesty in my view. The DOE should be celebrating, emulating and expanding this school rather than closing it. Closing any of the Renewal schools without first giving them a real chance to succeed by reducing their class sizes is also unfair and fundamentally destructive, to both its students and teachers. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Appendix

Table 1- Correlation Between Renewal Schools' Average Class Sizes and School Impact

Class Size Data	N	Pearson Correlation (R Value)	P Value
November 2016 Class Size	85	-0.326**	0.002
February 2017 Class Size	85	-0.314**	0.003

** Correlation is Significant at the .01 Level (1-tailed)

Data Sources:

November 2016 Class Size Data http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/data/classsize/classsize_2016_11_15.htm

February 2016 Class Size Data http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/data/classsize/classsize_2017_2_15.htm

DOE Dashboard with School Impact Data <https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/>

2016-2017 Renewal Schools <http://teachnyc.net/assets/RenewalDirectory201617.pdf>

²¹ See articles in Chalkbeat: <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2015/07/28/city-to-tweak-how-it-calculates-school-space-needs/#.VbjIDIH3arU> ; WNYC/Schoolbook: <https://www.wnyc.org/story/city-make-changes-how-it-accounts-space-schools/> ; and DNAinfo: <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20150729/sunset-park/de-blasio-not-doing-enough-fix-school-overcrowding-critics-say>